Australian Government
Department of Education, Skills and Employment

Inquiry into the Working Holiday Maker program

Submission from the Department of Education, Skills and Employment to the Joint Standing Committee on Migration

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Inquiry into the Working Holiday Maker program

1. Introduction

The Department of Education, Skills and Employment (the department) welcomes the Joint Standing Committee's Inquiry into the Working Holiday Maker program (the Committee).

This submission provides the Committee with information about the current state of Australia's labour market, including the impact of COVID-19 on the workforce of the agricultural industry. It also provides an overview of the programs within the department's portfolio which assist job seekers obtain work in the industry and employers recruit the workers they need to undertake seasonal work.

2. Executive Summary

The department delivers a range of programs to assist the agricultural industry to meet its workforce needs. This includes providing support to attract workers to the industry and assisting employers recruit workers to undertake seasonal work. The programs are jobactive, Harvest Trail Services and the Seasonal Worker Programme.

The programs enable the department to engage strategically on whole-of-government initiatives to address agricultural labour force issues. They also complement the department's efforts to work closely with the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment on broader agricultural workforce issues as well as assist the National Agricultural Labour Advisory Committee in their work to develop a National Agricultural Workforce Strategy.

The Australian Government's mainstream employment service, jobactive, connects job seekers with employers, including those in the agricultural industry. From 1 July 2015 to 31 July 2020, jobactive providers recorded over 1.6 million job placements with over 82,500 to employers in the agricultural, forestry and fishing industry. Most of the placements within this industry were identified as permanent positions (nearly 59,000 or 71 per cent that had a tenure of 6 months or more) and four out of five of these permanent positions were permanent casuals (over 47,000 or 80 per cent).

A persistent challenge for the industry has been meeting seasonal changes in workforce needs. To address this challenge, the department delivers Harvest Trail Services (HTS), which links workers (including Australian job seekers) with seasonal harvest jobs to meet seasonal peaks. The department also provides a national information service about harvest-related work opportunities across Australia and builds harvest employers' awareness of how the program can meet their recruitment needs through the Harvest Trail Information Service (HTIS).

The Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP) is a whole-of-government program that is led by the department. The program assists Australian producers and employers who are unable to source enough local Australian workers to meet their seasonal labour needs by providing access to a reliable seasonal workforce. The program provides employment opportunities

for up to nine months[1] for workers from nine participating Pacific Island countries and Timor-Leste to meet seasonal labour needs in the agricultural and accommodation industries (in certain locations) where there is insufficient local labour supply. Since November 2018, several enhancements were made to the SWP and HTS by the Australian Government to assist the agricultural industry meet its workforce needs. This includes improving accessibility, streamlining processes, reducing red tape and testing flexibilities for the SWP. It also includes from 1 July 2020, reforms to the HTS to expand its services to cover 16 harvest regions and for providers to receive financial incentives when they place and keep Australian job seekers in seasonal work.

3. The department's policy settings

3.1 COVID-19 and the Australian labour market

COVID-19 is having a substantial, negative impact on economic growth and labour market activity in Australia. Since March 2020, when Australia recorded its 100th case of COVID-19 and the shut-down of non-essential services and trade restrictions took effect, employment fell by 528,400 people (or 4.1 per cent).[2]

The level of unemployment in Australia has increased by 293,300 since March 2020, and there were more than one million unemployed people in July 2020. The unemployment rate has risen from 5.2 per cent recorded in March 2020, to 7.5 per cent in July 2020, the highest it has been since November 1998. The effective unemployment rate[3] was estimated at 9.9 per cent in July 2020. While this fell from 11.2 per cent in June 2020, it is still well above the 5.4 per cent recorded in March 2020.

COVID-19 will continue to affect the Australian labour market for some time. It is clear from recent surveys that the rise in COVID-19 cases in Victoria is affecting business confidence, which is likely to manifest in more fragile demand and much weaker jobs growth in the period ahead.

3.2 Labour market overview for the agricultural industry

While many jobs across Australia have been adversely affected by COVID-19, some areas of the economy have seen an increase in demand. This includes jobs in the health care and social assistance industry, transport, logistics, some areas of retail, mining and mining services, manufacturing, agricultural and government sectors.[4]

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[1] In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, on 4 April 2020, the Government announced temporary changes to visa arrangements that allows Pacific workers under the SWP and the Pacific Labour Scheme to continue working in the agricultural sector to ensure it has the labour force required during the pandemic, for up to 12 months.

[2] Australian Bureau of Statistics, Labour Force Survey July 2020 (seasonally adjusted).

[3] Includes people who have left the labour force since March 2020 and those who are employed but worked zero hours for economic reasons.

[4] National Skills Commission, *A Snapshot in Time: The Australian Labour Market and COVID-19,* www.nationalskillscommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-06/NSC_a_snapshot_in_time_report.pdf (page 49).

The sections below provide information on recent labour market trends in the agricultural, forestry and fishing industry[5], based on Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data.

The National Skills Commission (NSC) regularly surveys employers (including those in regional Australia) to identify changes in the labour market, and to collect information about how employers recruit and what they are looking for in applicants. This includes identifying practical ways job seekers can better connect with employment opportunities. While these surveys include employers in the agricultural, forestry and fishing industry, these employers tend to have lower response rates which in turn limits labour market analysis for the sector.

3.2.1 Horticulture Sector

As at May 2020, there were 62,700 people employed in the horticulture sector of the agricultural, forestry and fishing industry across Australia. **Table 1** provides labour market data (seasonally adjusted) for the horticultural sector.

Employment in the sector fell by 5,600 or 8.2 per cent over the quarter to May 2020 as the impacts of COVID-19 on the labour market developed. By comparison, employment across all industries fell by 6.2 per cent over the same period. New South Wales recorded the largest fall in horticulture sector employment over the quarter to May 2020 (down by 5,400), followed by Queensland (down by 5,100) and Victoria (down by 1,500).

The share of workers in the agricultural, forestry and fishing industry who are in the horticulture sector fell from 20.8 per cent in February 2020 to 17.5 per cent in May 2020.

Table 1—Horticulture Sector *Seasonally Adjusted Data*	**Employment level, May 2020 (000s)**	**Employment level, Feb 2020 (000s)**	**Quarterly Change (000s)**	**Quarterly Change (%)**
NSW	13.2	18.6	-5.4	-29.2
VIC	17.1	18.6	-1.5	-8.1
QLD	11.5	16.6	-5.1	-30.7
SA	7.7	5.7	2.0	36.0
WA	8.0	8.4	-0.5	-5.7
TAS	3.1	2.5	0.6	24.4
NT	2.1	1.8	0.3	17.4
ACT	0.8	0.5	0.3	-
AUST	62.7	68.3	-5.6	-8.2

Source: ABS Labour Force Survey, National Skills Commission, seasonally adjusted data, May 2020.

[5] ABS survey data do not capture seasonal workers or backpackers (including those resident in Australia under the Working Holiday Visa programs), because of the usual residence test used by the ABS in the collection of its labour force statistics.

Notes: Horticulture sector includes; Nursery and Floriculture Production, Mushroom and Vegetable Growing, and Fruit and Tree Nut Growing.

3.2.2 Agricultural, Forestry and Fishing Industry

As at May 2020, there were 354,500 people employed in the broader agricultural, forestry and fishing industry across Australia. **Table 2** provides seasonally adjusted labour market data for this industry.

The industry recorded the second largest increase in employment over the quarter (up by 30,000 or 9.3 per cent). By comparison, employment fell by 6.2 per cent across all industries. New South Wales recorded the largest increase in agricultural, forestry and fishing employment over the quarter (up by 10,700), followed by Queensland (9,600) and South Australia (4,400).

Table 2—Agricultural, Forestry and Fishing Industry *Seasonally Adjusted Data*	**Employment level, May 2020 (000s)**	**Employment level, Feb 2020 (000s)**	**Quarterly Change (000s)**	**Quarterly Change (%)**
NSW	85.6	74.9	10.7	14.3
VIC	90.3	90.4	-0.1	-0.1
QLD	88.9	79.3	9.6	12.1
SA	32.4	28.0	4.4	15.6
WA	37.3	35.7	1.5	4.3
TAS	16.1	17.1	-1.0	-5.8
NT	2.5	2.4	0.1	4.8
ACT	0.5	0.2	0.3	-
AUST	354.5	324.5	30.0	9.3

Source: ABS Labour Force Survey, National Skills Commission, seasonally adjusted data, May 2020.

3.2.3 Job vacancies in the Agricultural, Forestry and Fishing Industry

There have been significant falls in job advertisements for some of the largest employing occupations in the horticulture sector (part of the agricultural industry), noting that, in relative terms, the number of job advertisements for these occupations is low.

For example, Agricultural and Forestry Scientists recorded the largest fall in job advertisements (down by 39.7 per cent), followed by Other Farm, Forestry and Garden Workers (down by 36.2 per cent), Crop Farm Workers (down by 33.5 per cent) and Agricultural Technicians (down by 33.5 per cent). By comparison, the number of job advertisements across all occupations fell by 41.1 per cent over the same period.

Table 3 provides data on the Internet Vacancy Index (IVI) change for occupations relevant to the agricultural, forestry and fishing industry, since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 3—IVI (ANZSCO)	ANZSCO Title	Jun-20	Feb-20	Change (%)
8416	Mixed Crop and Livestock Farm Workers	109	103	6.2
8412	Crop Farm Workers	85	128	-33.5
8419	Other Farm, Forestry and Garden Workers	52	81	-36.2
3111	Agricultural Technicians	34	52	-33.5
7211	Agricultural, Forestry and Horticultural Plant Operators	33	42	-21.4
2341	Agricultural and Forestry Scientists	15	24	-39.7

Source: National Skills Commission, Internet Vacancy Index, June 2020, three month averages of original data.

3.3 The department's strategic engagement on agricultural labour force issues

The department works closely with the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment on broader agricultural workforce issues. This engagement involves sharing labour market data and ongoing consultation on emerging agricultural workforce trends and policy issues.

The department has also assisted the National Agricultural Labour Advisory Committee (NALAC) in their work to develop a National Agricultural Workforce Strategy. This work is led by the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment. The purpose of the strategy is to consider the workforce challenges facing the sector and recommend actions to attract, retain and upskill the domestic workforce as well as identify where access to a migrant workforce will be necessary to meet industry needs.

The NALAC's consultation with employers found the SWP provides confidence to horticulture businesses to invest in new developments, knowing that a seasonal workforce will be available to harvest their crops.

The department has also recently contributed to additional measures to address agricultural labour force issues, including:

- from April 2020, temporary changes to visas for the SWP and PLS to allow seasonal workers to stay and continue working in Australia during COVID-19.
- from mid-2020, the implementation of the Northern Territory Mango Trial, to allow for targeted recruitment of up to 170 workers from Vanuatu specifically for the 2020 mango harvest season.
- from August 2020, the restarting of the SWP and the PLS in collaboration and agreement with the states and territories.

These measures are in addition to the existing suite of mainstream employment services such as jobactive which supports job seekers to find new employment opportunities.

The programs are elaborated further from sections 3.4 to 3.6 below.

The department will continue to engage with the NALAC as they work towards delivering their report to Government by 31 October 2020.

3.4 jobactive

The Australian Government recognises the importance of supporting Australian job seekers to access work opportunities in the agricultural industry and provides a range of programs and services to help connect job seekers with the sector.

The Government's mainstream employment service, jobactive, connects job seekers with employment opportunities through a network of providers in over 1,700 locations across Australia. Since its introduction in July 2015, jobactive providers have achieved over 1.6 million job placements nationally. This includes over 82,500 to employers in the agricultural, forestry and fishing industry.

Most placements in this industry were identified as permanent positions (nearly 59,000 or 71 per cent that had a tenure of 6 months or more) and four out of five of these permanent positions were permanent casuals (over 47,000 or 80 per cent). As **Table 4** shows, the top five occupation descriptions for placements made in this industry (over 80 per cent of total placements) were:

Table 4 - Occupation Description	**Proportion of Job Placements to Industry**
Farm, Forestry and Garden Workers	41% (33,757)
Farmers and Farm Managers	16% (13,434)
Other Labourers	11% (8,932)
Mobile Plant Operators	8% (6,601)
Skilled Animal and Horticultural Workers	7% (5,738)

Given the regional location of many jobs in this sector, some job seekers may face relocation barriers to taking up horticultural work opportunities. Job seekers participating in jobactive are able to access support from their provider through the Employment Fund to assist the job seeker with costs in taking up a job in another location. Relocation assistance from the Employment Fund is available where the job seeker is unable to receive the support from the Relocation to Take-Up a Job program.

Assistance from the Employment Fund is at the discretion of jobactive providers. Along with relocation assistance, the Employment Fund can also be used for work-related items,

training, and targeted pre-employment and professional services that may help job seekers build the skills and experience they need to keep a job in the agricultural industry.

The Relocation Assistance to Take-Up a Job program assists eligible participants to relocate to take up an offer of full time, ongoing employment by removing the financial barriers that can prevent people from relocating. A participant can receive assistance of up to:

- $6000 (GST exclusive) if relocating to a regional area
- $3000 (GST exclusive) if relocating to a capital city
- an extra $3000 (GST exclusive) if relocating with a dependent.

As the Relocation Assistance to Take-Up a Job is only able to be used to relocate for full-time ongoing employment of 30 hours or more per week it is not able to be used to meet relocation costs for temporary/short-term seasonal work. However, as noted above assistance is available from the Employment Fund for relocation costs to take up short-term seasonal work.

3.5 Harvest Trail Services and the Harvest Trail Information Service

The department also manages the Harvest Trail Services (HTS) and the Harvest Trail Information Service (HTIS), formerly the Harvest Labour Services (HLS) and National Harvest Labour Information Service.

The HLS was introduced by the Government in 1998 to respond to horticulture industry concerns that crops were not being picked due to labour shortages. The program has continuously operated since then, delivering job placement services for the horticulture industry that aims to link workers (both temporary working visa holders and Australian job seekers) with seasonal harvest jobs to meet seasonal peaks in employer demand in harvest regions across Australia.

From 1 July 2020, the services were renamed under the common Harvest Trail brand. The HTS providers now operate in 16 horticulture regions across Australia under the *Harvest Trail Services Deed 2020-23* and continue to link workers, including Australian job seekers and working holiday makers, with seasonal harvest jobs to meet seasonal peaks. The objectives of the HTS are to address harvest employers' recruitment needs in harvest areas and increase the number of Australians employed in harvest work.

In the 2019–20 Budget, the Government announced reforms to encourage more Australians to take-up seasonal work. From 1 July 2020, the HTS providers receive new financial incentives when they place and keep Australian job seekers in seasonal work. HTS providers can claim outcome payments when a job seeker stays in a harvest job or multiple jobs for a 4, 12 and 26 week period. The outcome requirements are based on the average hours worked over the 4, 12 or 26 week period, accounting for irregular working hours and breaks between short term harvest jobs.

Table 5 - Type of payment	Harvest Outcome requirements	Fee (GST inclusive)
4 Week Harvest Outcome	At least 80 hours of harvest work over 4 weeks	$550
12 Week Harvest Outcome	At least 240 hours of harvest work over 12 weeks	$1,100
26 Week Harvest Outcome	At least 520 hours of harvest work over 26 weeks	$1,375

To assist Australian job seekers, including recent workers displaced due to the impact of COVID-19, HTS providers work in partnership with jobactive and other employment service providers who can assist with additional support. They will work to build the job seeker's skills that would allow them to continue being employed and may help address some misconceptions that harvest work consists only of short-term job opportunities for backpackers and other temporary working visa holders. While most harvest jobs are seasonal, the placements will help job seekers to gain work experience, move off welfare, and, possibly start a career in agriculture.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, HTS providers continue to operate, observing physical distancing requirements, limiting physical access to their offices and communicating via phone and emails with growers and job seekers, including Working Holiday Maker visa holders. It is also important that horticultural job opportunities are visible to job seekers. Harvest vacancies lodged on the Harvest Trail website are displayed on a map and also made available to job seekers on the jobactive website.

Australian farmers have had a challenging year, with current COVID-19 restrictions placing additional pressures on the supply of workers. The expansion of HTS into every major horticulture region is expected to result in more placements.

The HTIS provides a national information service about harvest related work opportunities across Australia, including in areas not serviced by HTS providers. The HTIS also builds harvest employers' awareness of how HTS can meet their recruitment needs. To assist job seekers and growers, the HTIS:

- provides a national free-call telephone information service. In 2019-20 this service received more than 1,500 calls on average per month.
- produces the National Harvest Guide, a comprehensive information booklet provided electronically via the website and printed for distribution in horticulture regions. In 2019-20 the Harvest Guide was downloaded almost 500 times on average per month.
- maintains helpful information on towns and crops on the Harvest Trail's website (https://jobsearch.gov.au/harvest or www.harvesttrail.gov.au). In 2019-20 Harvest Trail website was accessed 42,683 times on average per month.

3.6 Seasonal Worker Programme

The Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP) commenced on 1 July 2012, building on a three-and-a-half-year pilot scheme. The SWP has two key objectives:

- to contribute to the economic development of nine Pacific Island countries (Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu) and Timor-Leste.
- to assist Australian employers to meet seasonal labour needs in the agricultural sector, and accommodation sector (in selected locations), subject to local labour market testing.

The SWP is an uncapped and demand-driven program that is an important part of the solution to help meet workforce challenges, particularly in the agriculture sector. The program is an integral part of Australia's efforts to promote greater economic cooperation with the Pacific and help strengthen the region's economic resilience.

SWP workers can work for up to nine months, during normal times, in any twelve-month period and are employed under the same pay and conditions as Australian workers. However, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government announced on 4 April 2020, temporary changes to visa arrangements that allows Pacific workers under the SWP and the PLS to continue working in the agricultural sector to ensure it has the labour force required during the pandemic, for up to 12 months.

At the end of their stay they are required to return home to ensure they reconnect with their families and communities. The money they earn is used to send their children to school, build a house or start a small business, thereby increasing the economic activity in these communities.

3.6.1 Support provided to SWP workers

The program is designed to ensure workers are supported through their journey from seeking to participate in the SWP in their home country, preparation for departure, through their arrival and stay in Australia, as well as their return and reintegration home.

3.6.2 Pre-departure briefings

Workers recruited under the SWP participate in a briefing prior to departing for Australia. The briefing is provided by their home country's Labour Sending Unit (LSU) and covers a broad range of information to help workers understand, among other things, their employment contract (Offer of Employment) including their pay and deductions, Australian workplace law, visa arrangements, and workplace health and safety.

The LSU's also provide the workers with a pre-departure booklet in their local language (provided by the department). The booklet includes information to help workers understand their visa arrangements, their Offer of Employment letter, working conditions, the role of unions, taxation and superannuation, sending money home, and general information on

living in Australia. Workers are encouraged to pack the booklet, which is also available in English and other participating country languages on the SWP website[6].

3.6.3 Arrival briefings and connections with local communities

The Approved Employer[7] must give seasonal workers a face-to-face, in person, briefing when they arrive. The arrival briefing provides the seasonal workers with easy to understand information to help them to settle in.

The Approved Employer must invite the Fair Work Ombudsman (FWO) and the relevant union to the briefing.

The FWO has also published on its website a number of story boards (short videos) on Australia's workplace laws and worker rights. These have been designed for overseas workers and are available in English and languages of SWP participating countries. Approved Employers can use these in the arrival briefing to assist in explaining workers' rights and responsibilities in Australia.[8]

3.6.4 Ongoing support to workers

Approved Employers' obligations extend beyond the initial arrival briefing. Approved Employers' obligations include:

- ensuring all seasonal workers have, and maintain, adequate arrangements for health insurance during the period of their stay in Australia, consistent with the workers' visa conditions—in accordance with the Department of Home Affairs' (DHA) requirements, the health insurance must include cover for in-patient and out-patient care
- assisting seasonal workers to access medical and allied health services, when or if required
- monitoring the progress, placement and well-being of all seasonal workers
- complying with, and ensuring seasonal workers comply with, all work health and safety legislation and approved codes of practice relating to work health and safety
- providing accommodation for workers that meets the minimum requirements set down by the department, and which must meet relevant state or local laws, and
- providing an average minimum of 30 hours of work per week for the duration of their employment in Australia.

3.6.5 Country Liaison

A number of SWP participating countries have employed Pacific Labour Mobility liaison officers. The department maintains ongoing engagement and liaison with these officers in

[6] https://www.employment.gov.au/resources-seasonal-workers.

[7] An Approved Employer is an employer that has been vetted and granted approval to operate under the SWP.

[8] https://www.fairwork.gov.au/language-help/language-storyboards.

delivering the SWP. These officers support workers in person or over the phone and are another avenue for receiving information on the program.

3.6.6 SWP program assurance

DESE has an Assurance Framework (framework) that ensures the SWP is operating as intended, including that accommodation provided to workers is consistent with what has been approved by the department.

There are three elements of the framework:

1. Prevention and deterrence.
2. Detection.
3. Correction.

As part of this, the department operates the SWP Information Line (+61 2 6240 5234) and the SWP mailbox (seasonalworker@dese.gov.au) where concerns regarding the SWP can be reported. In addition to the SWP Information Line, the Pacific Labour Facility operates a dedicated after-hours worker welfare phone line.

To assist, 'SWP Online' supports employers using the SWP by simplifying and streamlining administrative requirements. The SWP Online provides quick access to all Approved Employer records, supports transparency of all transactions with the department, and reduces red tape. Improvements to the system continue to ensure that it effectively operates as a single channel for Approved Employers' transactions with the department.

3.6.7 SWP reforms

On 5 November 2018, in response to concerns regarding accessibility of the SWP, the Australian Government announced changes to improve its accessibility through streamlining processes and reducing red tape for Approved Employers. These changes included:

- extending the time workers can work in Australia from six to nine months for all countries (previously only workers from Kiribati, Nauru and Tuvalu could work for up to nine months and workers from Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Tonga and Vanuatu could work for up to six months);
- out of pocket costs for Approved Employers (i.e. costs towards workers' airfares) were reduced from $500 to $300; and
- labour market testing results would remain valid for a period of six months (previously three months).

3.6.8 Regional Pilot

On 2 April 2019, the Government announced the SWP Regional Pilot to address agricultural workforce challenges, improve access to the SWP for smaller farmers, and increase flexibilities within the program. The measure 'helping to meet regional workforce challenges

through a 12-month Seasonal Worker Programme pilot' formed part of the 2019-20 Budget and was provided $2.85 million in funding.

The pilot was implemented on 1 May 2019, in three regions in response to agricultural workforce challenges informed by labour market conditions and feedback provided by industry—Sunraysia (Victoria/New South Wales), Goulburn-Murray (Victoria), and the Riverina (New South Wales). The pilot aimed to:

- improve access to workers under the SWP for smaller farms by trialling flexibilities and red tape reduction through streamlined recruitment processes, developed in consultation with industry bodies
- allow for the movement of workers between farms without the Department's prior approval (speeding up responsiveness) and
- provide on the ground assistance to farmers and growers to access the SWP and meet their workforce needs through the introduction of Regional Coordinators in each region.

The pilot was due to conclude on 30 April 2020, but was extended to 30 June 2022 as part of the Government's Regional Agriculture Migration Package, see further below.

3.6.9 Regional Agriculture Migration Package

On 19 November 2019 the Government announced changes to the pilot as part of the Regional Agriculture Migration Package. The changes to address agricultural workforce challenges in the Mallee region included:

- the pilot, which was due to end on 30 April 2020, was extended to 30 June 2022.
- the pilot was also expanded from three regions to include, from 1 January 2020, the whole of the Wimmera Mallee region, which includes the horticulture rich area around Swan Hill. An additional Regional Coordinator was appointed to the Wimmera Mallee region and commenced in January 2020.
- as an additional feature of the Regional Agriculture Migration Package, Approved Employers under the SWP in the pilot regions are able to share workers in those regions. This flexibility allows SWP Employers to meet the workforce needs of smaller farmers with short harvest seasons and those with unpredictable picking periods.

The Regional Agriculture Migration Package was provided $13.2 million in funding in the 2019-2020 Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook.

3.6.10 Border closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic

Prior to the closure of Australia's international borders in response to COVID-19, the SWP had grown at an average annual rate of around 42 per cent. From the start of the program on 1 July 2012, the number of visas granted under the SWP increased from 1,473 in 2012-13 to 12,202 in 2018-19. Following the closure of Australia's international borders on 20 March

2020 as a result of COVID-19, there have been no new arrivals of seasonal workers. At that time there were close to 7,000 SWP and around 1,000 Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS) workers in Australia.

In response to COVID-19, on 4 April 2020, the Government announced temporary changes to visa arrangements that allows Pacific workers under the SWP and the PLS to continue working in the agricultural sector to ensure it has the labour force required during the pandemic, for up to 12 months.

As at 24 August 2020, there have been over 4,800 redeployments of workers in Australia to help meet labour demand since March 2020.

3.6.11 The Northern Territory Mango Trial - Targeted trial recruitment under the SWP

Following engagement with the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment, industry representatives and the Northern Territory Government, a targeted trial is being delivered to help meet the labour needs of Northern Territory mango growers and test arrangements for the entry and management of seasonal workers in a measured way, while protecting the health of Australians and the workers.

This trial will see the reopening of the SWP for a controlled number of recruitments, allowing up to 170 workers from Vanuatu to enter Australia and be available to help with the 2020 harvest season. Public health is a primary consideration and there will be stringent conditions in place to ensure the safety of Australians and Pacific workers. This includes 14-days mandatory quarantine for the seasonal workers at Manigurr-ma Village Quarantine Facility in Howard Springs.

Many Australians have lost their jobs due to the COVID-19 pandemic and to ensure Australians are recruited first, growers will need to undertake stringent labour market testing. These jobs are in some remote parts of Australia and in the past growers have relied on Working Holiday Makers and other overseas workers to harvest their crops.

The workers are expected to arrive in Australia in early September 2020.

3.6.12 Restart of the SWP and the PLS

To assist industries facing persistent workforce shortages, in particular agriculture, on 21 August 2020, the Australian Government announced that the Commonwealth, states and territories agreed to arrangements to restart the SWP and PLS to allow Pacific and Timorese workers to come to Australia in a targeted and controlled way.

This announcement builds upon visa changes the Australian Government announced in April to allow temporary workers in Australia to extend their stay and support critical industries. The announcement complements the trial in the Northern Territory to address labour shortages affecting mango farmers, and is another measure to help critical industries and assist Australia’s economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

State and territory governments will need to formally write to the Commonwealth to participate in the arrangements. Where states and territories seek to participate, workers from participating countries in the Pacific and Timor-Leste, will enter Australia in a controlled way to support critical industries in rural and regional Australia. States and territories participating in the arrangements will coordinate the recruitment of workers, subject to advice from their respective chief health officers.

Stringent health requirements will be in place to ensure that recruitments do not compromise the health and safety of Australians or Pacific and Timor-Leste workers. The workers will undertake a 14-day quarantine period in line with specific state or territory requirements and must return a negative COVID-19 test before leaving the quarantine facilities and starting work.

Industries, in consultation with state and territory governments, will determine which Approved Employers under the SWP and PLS will participate. The Approved Employers must meet SWP and PLS recruitment criteria, including:

- robust labour market testing, ensuring Australian workers are considered first
- net financial benefit to the workers
- appropriate approved accommodation arrangements for the workers
- appropriate workplace health and safety procedures, including a COVID-19 management plan approved by the state and territory governments.